Stockstad and Davis Habitat Conservation Project Draft Environmental Assessment

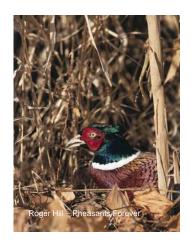
Fee Title Addition to Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area

April 2006



Trumpeter Swans







Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks 490 North Meridian Road Kalispell, Montana 59901 (406) 752-5501

Stockstad and Davis Habitat Conservation Project

Draft Environmental Assessment

Public Comment Period: April 28 through May 28, 2006

Public Hearing: Ninepipes Lodge (Allentown)

Thursday, May 11, 2006

7:00 p.m.

Address Comments to:

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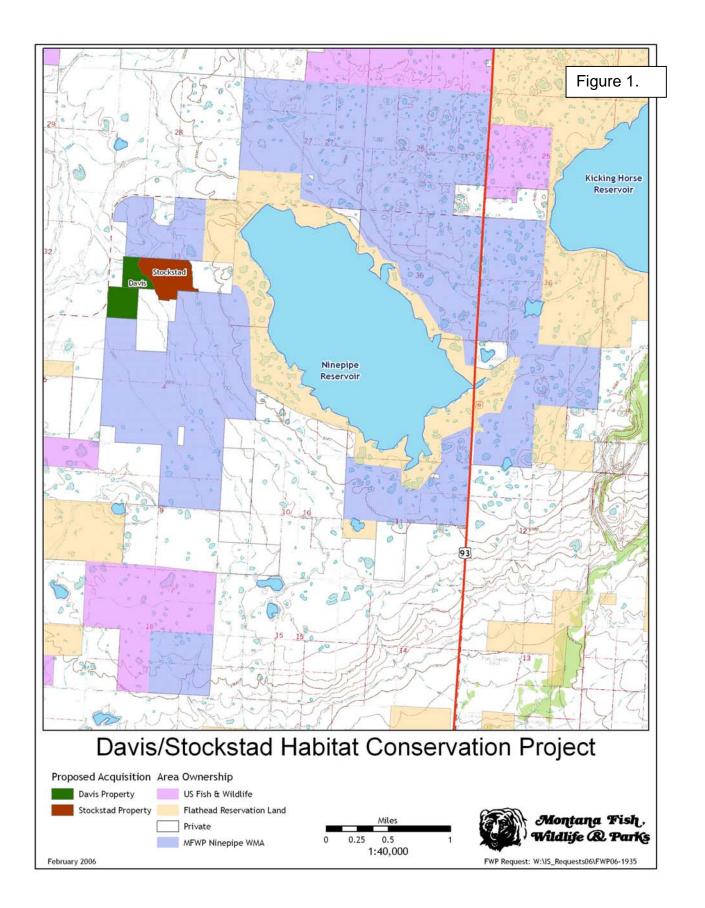
INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase in fee title approximately 135 acres of land adjoining the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in the Mission Valley. The proposal involves two different adjacent ownerships of approximately equal size in Lake County, Montana (Fig. 1).

The project area contains important wetland and upland habitat within a complex of land protected by private landowners and state, federal, and tribal governments for wildlife conservation and hunting and birding-related recreation. The properties, like others in the vicinity, are under pressure of subdivision and development. As private agricultural landowners retire west of the Continental Divide in Montana, the trend has been to sell the farms and ranches for residential subdivision. Both Hope Stockstad and Lamar Davis, the project private landowners, instead of selling their land for residential subdivision, would like to have their lands conserved into the future for conservation and recreation, and contacted FWP independently to offer them for sale.

FWP has worked closely with the CSKT Tribal Wildlife Program on upland bird and waterfowl conservation issues in the greater Ninepipe area. The project proposal received tentative approval from the FWP Commission and the Flathead Reservation Fish and Wildlife Board in the spring of 2005. The project would be funded with Habitat Montana funds. The acquired lands would become part of the Ninepipe WMA and be managed to provide a public recreation resource associated with the local wildlife populations.

The nearby Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1921 because of the inherent value of the area to wildlife. Beginning in 1953, the Montana Fish and Game Department (now Fish, Wildlife & Parks), under the direction of Dwight Stockstad, began acquiring available real estate surrounding the Ninepipe NWR to conserve waterfowl and upland bird habitat and provide for public hunting. Through the years, as key parcels became available, FWP has added select parcels to the Ninepipe WMA. This area has now become a destination upland bird and waterfowl hunting area and a national birding hotspot.



PURPOSE AND NEED

The two adjacent project properties are both bounded on two sides by the Ninepipe WMA. This WMA is located in the Mission Valley of Lake County, Montana, within a high priority area identified by Habitat Montana in the Five Valleys Prairie Pothole Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Plan and in the Glaciated Valleys area funded by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). Habitat Montana, an FWP program and funding source for this project that is solely hunters' dollars, has its own habitat objectives and priorities. Riparian/wetland habitats make up less than 4% of the land base of the state of Montana, and these habitats are identified as a priority in the FWP plan. The Five Valleys plan also identified high quality waterfowl production habitats in northwestern Montana. The property is situated amid a complex of Tribal, state, and federally managed wildlife habitat protection sites in the Mission Valley and productive private lands that contain a highly unique prairie pothole wetland complex containing thousands of small pothole wetlands (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Greater Ninepipe WMA Area Glaciated Wetlands

This glaciated pothole area comprises about 13,000 acres of mixed ownership and lies generally between Post Creek to the south and Crow Creek to the north. Ninepipe WMA lies in the heart of this pothole complex, surrounds the Ninepipe NWR, and abuts several waterfowl production areas and private lands with conservation easements held by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Ninepipe WMA also adjoins lands owned and managed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes for their wetland and wildlife values. This area is important to pheasants and migratory waterfowl (including trumpeter swans), shorebirds, raptors (such as snowy owls), amphibians and reptiles, and grizzly bears. The Ninepipe WMA provides a significant amount of year-round public recreational opportunities. The sporting public in the Flathead, Mission, and Missoula Valleys need and support increased public waterfowl and pheasant hunting opportunities.





Snowy owls roosting on farm implement and foraging in the Mission Valley, 2006.

Pheasants Forever, Polson Outdoors, Big Sky Upland Bird Association, and Ducks Unlimited

FWP has worked with many private agricultural landowners and conservation organizations in the local area since the early 1950s to help conserve the glaciated pothole habitats by developing the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area for the public to enjoy. Most recently, the Mission Valley Chapter and Five Valleys Chapter of Pheasants Forever have worked very closely with FWP and the private agricultural landowners in the greater Ninepipe area (see Appendix C). In addition to Pheasants Forever, Polson Outdoors and the Missoula Big Sky Upland Bird Association have also worked with FWP on upland bird and waterfowl conservation projects in the immediate area. Other conservation organizations that are active in the Ninepipe area are Ducks Unlimited and Western Montana Sportsman Association out of Missoula.

Project Proximity to Existing WMA

The landowners would like to sell their adjoining properties to FWP to preserve the values they provide for wildlife and hunting-related recreation and because of their proximity to the existing WMA. Combined, they abut the recently acquired Ringneck Ranch (2003 and 2004) and Palmer (2001) properties as well as connecting two separate parcels purchased during the early establishment of the project (1956). There are two other adjacent private properties; one is managed as a private wildlife refuge and the other is held by a nonprofit organization that represents the Owl Research Institute. These proposed acquisitions contain numerous functional and/or restorable wetlands, as well as intact upland nesting habitat as is found on the adjacent WMA.

DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Habitat/Recreation Values:

4/24/06

FWP proposes to acquire the Stockstad and Davis properties in fee simple for the purpose of preserving and enhancing habitat for a variety of avian and mammalian wildlife and to provide recreational hunting opportunities. The Ninepipe WMA area Stockstad/Davis Draft EA

provides the most significant waterfowl nesting and ring-necked pheasant habitat in northwestern Montana. This productive upland habitat also supports other wildlife species, including trumpeter swans, owls, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, sandhill cranes, shore birds, small mammals, and reptiles and amphibians. The general area supports one of the highest recorded densities of nesting short-eared owls and northern harriers. Winter concentrations of rough-legged hawks and other raptor species rival other similar habitat types throughout North America.



Lamar Davis and John Grant





Stockstad Property Wetland



Dwight Stockstad - First Ninepipe Manager

Wetland Attributes:

There are numerous opportunities to improve or create waterfowl nesting and pheasant habitat on these properties following acquisition. The Stockstad property contains 4 wetland basins comprising approximately 8 acres, as well as an estimated 5 restorable wetlands comprising another 15-20 acres. The adjacent Davis property has 1 wetland basin that is about 4 acres in size that can be enhanced, and other marshy sites. About 15-20 acres of additional wetlands could be created. The wetland habitats would be evaluated and restored and/or enhanced by FWP following an inventory planned for all FWP lands in the Ninepipe WMA. FWP will also partner with Ducks Unlimited or other organizations to aid in that restoration/ enhancement effort.

FWP would acquire all water rights and pay annual irrigation fees. Water is available from the irrigation project adjoining the WMA. The acquired lands would become part of the Ninepipe WMA and would be managed for wildlife as well as for public recreation associated with the wildlife populations. Ninepipe WMA supports very high hunter densities, and crowding concerns are an issue during hunting seasons. This area offers some of the best public waterfowl and upland bird hunting access in western Montana. In addition to increasing wildlife populations, recreational opportunity for waterfowl and upland bird hunters would increase following acquisition.

Location/Ownership:

The project is located in Lake County in the south half of Section 33, Township 20 North, Range 20 West. On wildlife lands, FWP, by statute, will pay to the county in which the land resides "a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." (84-1-603)

Costs/Funding Sources:

The FWP Commission approved this cooperative project on a tentative basis last spring. Habitat Montana funds would pay for this project. In order to meet Mrs. Stockstad's estate planning deadline in 2005, The Conservation Fund purchased the property and agreed to hold it until FWP completes its public MEPA process and hopefully receives final Commission approval this summer. Should the project not be approved by the Commission, The Conservation Fund would likely find a buyer for the property, and access may or may not be a part of that sale. The cost for the 70-acre Stockstad property was approximately \$350,000. The Davis 65-acre property will cost approximately \$325,000.

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes:

Because the property is located on the Flathead Indian Reservation, FWP contacted the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' (CSKT) Tribal Fish and Wildlife Program personnel to give them an opportunity to purchase this property if it might meet their habitat program objectives. The CSKT Tribal Fish and Wildlife Program personnel decided to not pursue this acquisition and informed FWP of their decision. The Flathead Reservation Fish and Wildlife Board also endorsed this habitat conservation project.

Trumpeter Swans:

Trumpeter swans are considered a species of special concern and the focus of a large-scale Tribal restoration effort. They have regularly utilized both properties during the last several years and would be expected to increase their use following wetland area restoration and enhancement. Approximately 20 trumpeter swans were released in the

Mission Valley in 2003, 30 were released in 2004, and 19 were released in 2005. In each of the last two years, swans have hatched and reared young on WMA lands adjacent to the Davis and Stockstad properties.





Breeding Pair of Swans

Collared Swan and Stockstad Property

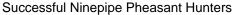
Management Approach:

FARMING ACTIVITY: Land management activities such as weed control, fencing, and seeding/haying would follow the current management plan for Ninepipe WMA. Short-term management activities would include managing weeds through spot spraying, clipping, and pulling, and maintaining the current water delivery system. Areas of bare ground would be broadcast with grass seed. Private share farming activity could also occur on these lands, similar to the rest of Ninepipe WMA, to manage upland cover and establish upland game bird and waterfowl food plots. Pursuant to the 2005 Montana Legislature Senate Bill 259, a weed management plan was developed cooperatively with Lake County Weed District.

Long-term management objectives would include wetland restoration and establishment of dense nesting cover and food plots as needed. Grain farming and haying by sharecroppers, management tools used on adjacent WMA lands, would potentially occur on portions of both properties.

Day-to-day management and operations costs, estimated at \$1,000 annually, would be incorporated into the current operations management program and budget at Ninepipe WMA. County roads border the south and west sides of the Davis property and should provide ample public access for waterfowl and upland bird hunters and also for wildlifeviewing opportunities. The Stockstad property is within the exterior boundaries of the WMA and access would be via current FWP ownership or the Davis property (see Figure 1). After purchase, FWP estimates that the land would be used by a minimum of 50 people on opening day of pheasant season. Overall, we estimate the land could generate 300-400 hunter-days annually.







Ninepipe WMA 2005

Hiking, birdwatching, photography, amateur or noncommercial dog training, and nature study are becoming increasingly popular and would all occur on this property. Some form of wildlife-oriented recreation occurs on the Ninepipe WMA every day of the year, and this level of use is expected to occur on the project properties as well. The properties offer excellent birdwatching for waterfowl, raptors, and other birds.

Tax revenues collected by Lake County are not expected to change substantially. FWP would make cash payments in lieu of taxes to Lake County that would approximate the rate paid by a private landowner. There are no homes or structures on the properties.

The economic values of this land for wildlife-related recreation and public expenditures to local merchants during the hunting seasons are significant. Members of the Mission Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever, Big Sky Upland Bird Association in Missoula, and Polson Outdoors Incorporated all recreate on the WMA throughout the year.

Only limited public recreational opportunities have been available on the property historically. By dispersing public pheasant hunting pressure throughout the Ninepipe WMA area, the quality of recreational experience for all hunters in the area would be enhanced if these 135 acres were added to the WMA.

Proposed Management Plan:

The Stockstad and Davis properties will become part of the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area and managed similarly to the rest of the WMA to provide and protect habitat for a diversity of wildlife species. The emphasis will be on producing pheasants and waterfowl while providing year-round wildlife-related recreational opportunities.

The property will be posted with Wildlife Management Area signs. Approximately 3/8-mile of new fence will be constructed to discourage trespass to or from adjacent private land. Boundary fences that separate the Stockstad and Davis properties from one another and from the existing WMA lands, as well as all interior fences on the two properties, will be removed. In total almost two miles of old fence will be taken off the landscape.

Development of wetlands will begin soon after FWP takes ownership and will continue for a number of years, as time and funding are available. A topographic survey will be conducted to determine drainage patterns and to identify potential wetland restoration and construction sites. Funding for engineering and constructing dikes on favorable sites will be pursued. Water levels in existing wetlands will be supplemented and suitable draws kept moist to encourage establishment of wetland vegetation. Culverts will be installed to enable administrative access.

Existing, robust stands of grass will be left to provide security for ground-nesting birds. Haying after July 15 each year will be permitted where appropriate to maintain stand vigor. Areas of rank and weedy vegetation will be cultivated to allow establishment of desirable vegetation, beginning with cereal grain crops and eventually rotating into mixtures of perennial grasses and legumes. Several grain fields, 5-10 acres in size, will be kept in production each year as stands of grass become decadent over the years.

Mowing, spraying, and burning will occasionally be employed where necessary to control noxious weeds and maintain vigor of desirable herbaceous vegetation. Hand pulling and clipping of certain weeds will occur to a limited extent. Thickets and hedgerows of shrubs will be planted in various locations, once suitable sites are identified, to increase habitat diversity.

DISCUSSION OF ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A – Proposed Action: Complete Fee Title Acquisitions

FWP would acquire the 135-acre Stockstad/Davis properties located adjacent to the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area. Through fee-title ownership, FWP would have the opportunity to restore and enhance wetlands and uplands and expand recreational opportunities for the public. FWP would manage weeds and provide public access areas.

Alternative A compliments FWP's management efforts at Ninepipe WMA to produce and maintain habitats for a variety of wildlife and for a variety of compatible public uses. Alternative A would allow FWP to implement management strategies and management activities on the property that have been successfully employed on the adjacent Ninepipe WMA. Alternative A would result in increases in production of and seasonal use by ducks, geese, and pheasants, thereby creating an estimated 300-400 additional hunter-days of recreation each year.

Alternative B - No Action

FWP would not acquire the Stockstad/Davis properties, affecting both habitat and recreational opportunities. It would also likely result in one of the current landowners developing the properties for residential subdivision.

Under this alternative, current wildlife and hunting values related to the land and the ongoing agricultural practices could not be assured into the future. Private bird hunting access or no access could also be possible under this alternative.

Description of Areas Related to Indirect or Cumulative Effects

The proposed project lies in an area of Tribal, USFWS, private, and state FWP conservation lands. Cumulatively, this project would compliment the conservation and hunting-related recreation programs that are present in the greater Ninepipe area today. By providing new hunting and birding-related access, the project could indirectly increase funds spent by CSKT natural resource programs on wildlife and hunting-related projects in the greater Ninepipe area as a result of the State-Tribal Agreement in which hunting license funds generated by non-Tribal members that live on and off the Flathead Indian Reservation are spent locally on conservation projects.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

This section of the environmental assessment presents an evaluation of the impacts of the alternatives, including secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical and human environment:

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Land Resources:

Alternative A: For both properties, share-farming uses may continue similar to previous activities, except the goal of those operations would be to enhance wildlife and habitat values. Lands may continue to be cultivated for weed control, establishment of nesting cover, or for food crops. Wetlands could be enhanced or restored through plugging of drains, ditches, or other outlets, or through excavation. Wetland soils and plants could be reestablished in the restored wetlands. Soils on-site may have to be disturbed during this restoration process. A wetland restoration plan would be developed and covered by a separate environmental analysis.

Alternative B: Under the no-action alternative the properties could be subdivided and/or developed for residential or commercial uses. The important farmland soils and riparian/wetland land resources could be impacted through direct construction of roads and buildings and through filling of wetlands. New land uses could also reduce soil productivity through overgrazing and weeds.

Air Quality:

Alternative A: Under the proposed action, land uses would primarily be agricultural or habitat. Other than short-term dust effects that could occur with ongoing agricultural activities, such as prescribed burning, or temporary soil disturbances associated with

restoration of upland or wetland habitats on the properties, no activities would occur that could negatively affect future long-term air quality of this area.

Alternative B: No action would allow for land uses other than wildlife and agriculture to occur. Negative impacts to current air quality in the project area could occur.

Water:

Alternative A: The possible restoration of emergent and riparian vegetation along existing or restored wetlands will have a beneficial effect on the quality of surface and ground water. If it requires excavation or other dirt-moving activities, the restoration of wetlands could have a localized, short-term negative impact on water quality.

Alternative B: Under the no-action alternative, the quality and quantity of wetland and water resources may not be maintained or enhanced in the future. Residential subdivision or development of the project lands could result in additional road building, filling/draining of wetlands, and erosion of soils, and could have an impact on water quality.

Vegetation:

Alternative A: For both parcels, the proposed alternative would maintain the diversity, quantity, and quality of both upland and wetland vegetation in the project area. The project would also help maintain the form and function of existing natural wetlands and improve the vegetative condition of these wetlands in the project area.

Alternative B: Under the no-action alternative, other residential land uses could occur and would not ensure that current vegetation communities or diversity would be maintained in the future.

Fish and Wildlife:

Alternative A: The project will result in the continued maintenance of the condition of wetlands and upland vegetation forage for upland game birds, waterfowl, and other bird species. The project would help secure and improve habitat for trumpeter swans being reintroduced to the Mission Valley by the Tribal Wildlife Program.

Alternative B: The no-action alternative could allow future residential or commercial development of one parcel. If that occurred, development activities could impact upland and wetland habitats, disrupt nesting and foraging activities, impact water quality, and negatively affect fish and wildlife values associated with these lands.

HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Noise/Electrical Effects:

Alternative A: These proposed projects would not have any effect on noise or cause any electrical disturbance.

Alternative B: No action would mean that current noise or electrical levels could change in the future.

Land Use:

Alternative A: For both properties, agricultural practices to manage and improve wildlife habitat with opportunity to produce hay or food crops would continue as a land use in Lake County. In addition, proposed habitat improvements would result in increased waterfowl and upland game bird populations that would lead to greater wildlife and recreational hunter use of the area. This would provide additional economic values for the community, especially during fall hunting seasons.

Alternative B: No action would mean that current land uses could change in the future.

Risk/Health Hazards:

Alternative A: The proposed action includes the likelihood of occasional use of chemicals for noxious weed control. Whenever chemicals are used, there is some potential for a small-scale spill. To reduce that potential, herbicides would only be applied by a licensed applicator following label instructions and taking all precautions to prevent an accidental discharge.

Alternative B: No action would probably maintain the status quo associated with risks and health hazards that are typical of most agricultural hayland operations or associated with other land uses that could occur in the future.

Community Impact:

Alternative A: The proposed action will maintain agriculture and wildlife habitat on 135 acres in Lake County. These projects will help maintain or improve current populations of upland game birds, waterfowl, raptors, songbirds, and semi-aquatic furbearers that now exist in the project areas.

There would be positive effects to tourism, primarily in hunting and in wildlife viewing opportunities in the Mission Valley. Open space and undeveloped lands will become more valuable in the future as residential development encompasses more and more rural lands. Any reduction in the vitality of the local economy would be at least partially offset by increases in retail merchandise, food, lodging, and travel supplies associated

with wildlife-related recreation. See attached Socio-Economic Review (Appendix B) for further detail.

Alternative B: The no-action alternative would mean that the current agricultural and recreational nature of the properties probably would change in the near future.

Public Services:

Alternative A: The purchase of the properties includes a requirement by the state to pay in-lieu-of taxes on the land equal to previous tax values. On wildlife lands, FWP will pay to the county in which the land resides "a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." (84-1-603) The state will not require any new services; FWP will pay irrigation and any other water fees associated with these properties.

Alternative B: No action means that land uses or public service requirements could change in the future on lands in the project area. Future landowners may not continue with agriculture, habitat, and irrigation, but may sell, subdivide, or develop the properties.

Aesthetics/Recreation:

Alternative A: In the project area, the purchase of 135 acres would increase the quality and quantity of public recreational opportunities by providing more abundant and diverse wildlife populations for hunting, photography, and viewing pursuits. Existing open space available to the public would be maintained.

Alternative B: No action means that the current aesthetic and recreational values of the property would likely change in the future.

<u>Cultural/Historic Resources:</u>

Alternative A: The project area is not known to have any known cultural sites, structures, or objects of prehistoric or paleontological importance, nor would it interfere with any unique cultural or religious use of the site. Because the project does not include the disturbance of native sod or structures, it should not affect cultural or historic resources.

Alternative B: No action means that current cultural or historic resource values of the property would not be maintained in the future.

Summary Evaluation of Significance:

Based upon evaluation of potential impacts related to the proposal, a determination has been made that an EIS is not required. The EA is an appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action because: 1) no endangered or threatened plant or animal species will be significantly affected; 2) there are no long-term or irretrievable impacts to the physical environment; and 3) there are minor impacts to the human environment in the form of increased recreational use, but all can be mitigated to acceptable levels.

List of Agencies Consulted During Preparation of the EA:

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes US Fish and Wildlife Service State Historic Preservation Office Conservation Fund Lake County Weed District

Public Involvement:

The Region and FWP have received considerable support for the proposals during project exploration and development. The Region will make the EA available to interested individuals, groups, and agencies, and will facilitate a public hearing at Ninepipes Lodge (Allentown), Thursday, May 11, 2006, at 7:00 p.m. to discuss the proposal and receive public comment. There will be a 30-day public review, from April 28 through May 28, 2006. Please direct comments/questions to John Grant, FWP Wildlife Area Manager, (406) 644-2510 or e-mail to igrant@mt.gov; or Jim Williams, FWP Wildlife Program Manager, (406) 752-5501 or e-mail to iwilliams@mt.gov.

Cost:

The negotiated price of the property is approximately \$350,000 for the 70-acre Stockstad property and approximately \$325,000 for the 65-acre Davis property.

Appendix A. Ninepipe WMA Pheasant Hunter Vehicle Count

The table below lists the total number of vehicles (typically 1-4 pheasant hunters per vehicle) parked in parking lots and along the roadsides around the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area during both days of the opening weekend of the pheasant season from 1988 through 2001.

PHEASANT HUNTER VEHICLES ON SURVEY ROUTE AT NINEPIPE WMA

Year	Opening Saturday	Sunday
1988	217	84
1989	192	122
1990	234	99
1991	169	64
1992	203	83
1993	203	76
1994	208	83
1995	149	55
1996	170	79
1997	165	66
1998	167	80
1999	134	49
2000	138	62
2001	135	37
2002	137	52
2003	114	52
2004	120	48
2005	123	55



Mission Valley Pheasants Forever Chapter President Jim Ploskunak and FWP Commissioner Vic Workman enjoying opening day at Ninepipe WMA.

Appendix B.

STOCKSTAD/DAVIS PROPERTIES FEE TITLE ACQUISITION SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

March 2006

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Prepared by: Rob Brooks

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements purchases, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when wildlife habitat is acquired using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the fee title purchase of properties presently owned by the Stockstad and Davis families. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee title purchases.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The 70-acre Stockstad property and 65-acre Davis property are located northeast of Charlo, Montana, in Lake County. A detailed description of this property is included in the environmental assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

Migratory birds and pheasants are the two main species utilizing the area, although there are a host of other wildlife including trumpeter swans that also depend on these types of habitats. A complete list of species is available in the EA.

C. Current Use

The Stockstad and Davis properties are currently used for cattle forage production.

D. Management Alternatives

- 1) Fee title purchase on the property by MFWP
- 2) No purchase

MFWP Fee Title Purchase

The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection for the wetlands this prairie pothole area supports as well as protection and enhancement of the extremely productive upland bird/ waterfowl habitat and wildlife this land sustains. In addition, public recreation opportunities including hunting, birdwatching, and educational trips will be preserved.

No Purchase Alternative

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if MFWP does not purchase the land by fee title.

Subdivision or development of the land is a possibility. Public access may not be allowed depending on who purchases the property. The economic impacts associated with this alternative have not been quantified in this report.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat, help maintain the integrity of the adjacent WMA, and provide for public access for hunting and other recreational opportunities. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the fee title purchase from two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the fee title purchase to MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e., income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

The financial impacts on MFWP are related to the purchase price of the fee title purchase and maintenance/management costs. The Stockstad property fee title purchase will cost MFWP \$350,000. The Davis parcel will cost \$325,000. Maintenance/management costs related to the purchase are associated with maintaining fences, weed control, and irrigation. These properties will become part of the Ninepipe WMA, and management costs will be incorporated into the WMA's budget.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase. There will not be any significant changes in tax revenues to local governments, including schools, due to these purchases. It is anticipated that these lands will continue to be assessed as agricultural land for tax purposes. Taxes on the Davis parcel were \$2,257 in 2005 and \$2,849 on the Stockstad parcel. Montana Code 87-1-603 states "the treasurer of each county in which the department owns any land shall describe the land, state the number of acres in each parcel, and request the drawing of a warrant to the county in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen."

B. Economic Impacts

The fee title purchase will not significantly affect the agricultural activities on the Stockstad or Davis properties. These two parcels are currently in pasture. MFWP is planning to raise small grain for food plots for waterfowl and upland birds on a portion of the property. This cropping activity as well as the weed control, fencing, and irrigation work will have a small but positive financial impact on local farm and ranch businesses.

Currently the Ninepipe WMA provides about 3,000 hunter days per year. It is anticipated that the acquisition will improve the quality of the hunting experience by spreading these hunters over a larger area. In addition, nonhunting use such as wildlife viewing is expected to provide about 400 days of use. This activity will have a positive economic impact to the local business community of approximately

\$16,000 - \$20,000 annually.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The fee title purchase of the Stockstad and Davis parcels will provide long-term protection for wildlife habitat, maintain the agricultural character of the land, ensure public access for hunting and other recreational/educational opportunities, and help to ensure the overall integrity of the Ninepipe WMA.

Lake County will not change due to the acquisition of these properties. Both parcels will continue to be assessed as agricultural land, and MFWP is required to pay the same amount of taxes as a private citizen under this assessment.

Agricultural activities will continue on this property. Hunting and other recreational activities will continue at their present levels and in some cases increase. The financial impacts of this acquisition on local businesses will be neutral to positive in both the short and long run.

On a Mission

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APPENDIX C